

# AMASYA, TURKEY: LESSONS IN URBANITY

*William Bechhoefer and Ali Kamil Yalçın*

*"It is generally true that Turkish cities were unprepared to face the demands of the twentieth century, with the net result that as modern cities encroached on traditional Ottoman structures, they destroyed whatever was valuable or worth preserving in them."*

*Sedad Hakkı Eldem.<sup>1</sup>*

**E**ldem's statement could have been written specifically about Amasya in Northern Anatolia (1). Occupying a dramatic and strategic site controlling the valley of the Yeşil Irmak river, Amasya's history developed from the Hittite period. While the city today owes its character primarily to development in the Ottoman period, the Ottomans based their building on land use patterns that are known to have been established as early as the time of Mithridates II of the Kingdom of Pontus, third century BC. The continuity of

urban development and architectural character is still visible, but is threatened on a daily basis by 'modern' building that ignores the qualities of site, climate, urban scale, architectural character, history and cultural context. The centre of Amasya flanks the river. On the north bank, Ottoman houses cling to the older fortified wall at the base of the steep mountain that rises to Pontic tombs and the ruins of a citadel at the top. The houses form the most important remaining assemblage of urban waterfront houses in Anatolia, comparable to some waterfront neighbourhoods on the Bosphorus near Istanbul. Cafés, promenades, and important Seljuk and Ottoman monuments occupy the south side of the river. The urban riverscape is architecturally and symbolically the heart of Amasya, the linear centre for layers of buildings and gardens parallel to the river

(2 and 3). An understanding of the principles by which this poetic urban experience is organized can help assure that development will continue longstanding urban traditions.

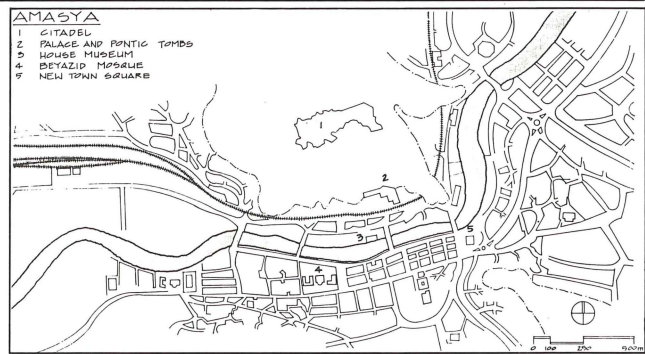
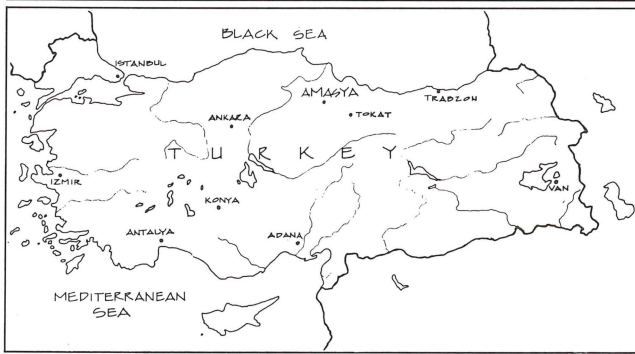
## History

As a site for a fortress, Amasya's mountain is ideal, for a vast area may be surveyed from the top and the slopes are so steep as to be easily defensible. Furthermore, the south face of the mountain at the base is ideal for the construction of a fortified wall on the river. The south orientation is desirable for house construction and the river provides a water supply. The river wall dates from the Pontic period and its

*1. General view of Amasya, looking north; a citadel overlooks the valley of the Yeşil Irmak river.*

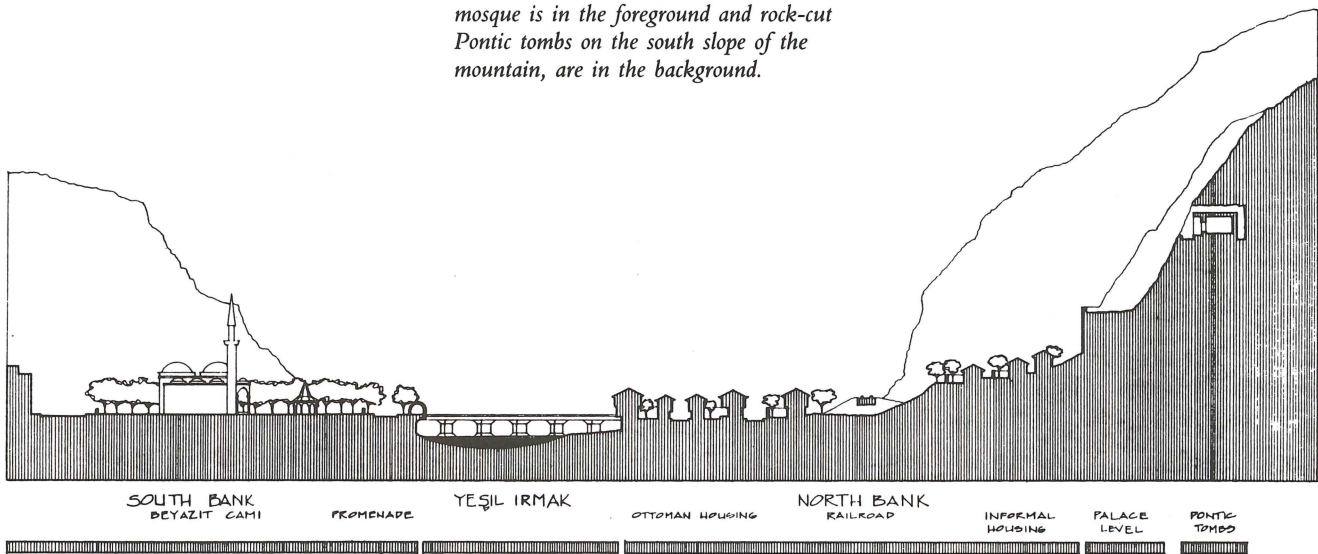






Below: Diagrammatic section of Amasya, demonstrating the layering of buildings and open spaces flanking the river. (Drawing by Victor Burbank.)

2. The linear centre of Amasya; Beyazid mosque is in the foreground and rock-cut Pontic tombs on the south slope of the mountain, are in the background.





## HERITAGE

remains are found in the basements of the later houses. The earliest settlement was built behind this wall; higher up are the rock-cut tombs which are the only important vestige of the Pontic Kingdom in Anatolia. It was at this level, too, that the king's palace was built. The citadel at the top protected the entire valley.

Amasya was taken over by the Romans and later by the Byzantines, serving as an important military headquarters. The Seljuk Turks moved in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, initially occupying the south river bank to fight the residents on the other side. At the end of the thirteenth century Amasya was conquered by a Mongol dynasty and in 1386 it was taken by Sultan Yildirim Seyazid and incorporated into the Ottoman empire.

Political stability under the Ottomans brought prosperity to Amasya. The city continued its strategic role as a military headquarters. Two sultans were born there and Sultan Beyazid II was one of a number of sultans who, as crown princes, were to serve their apprenticeships in government there. Because of its natural amenities and political importance, Amasya was one of the favourite cities of Suleiman the Magnificent for entertaining foreign guests and for his own personal visits. Architectural and urban development in the Ottoman period was consequently significant, building on long-established foundations.

### **The North Bank of the Yeşil Irmak**

The residential neighbourhood on the river was recognized by the Ottomans as ideal in satisfying their love of sun, gardens and view (4). Because of the security of the empire, the defensive wall no longer served its original function and became foundations for houses which view the river. As late as the mid-sixteenth century the houses were made of earth and had flat roofs, built in a timeless manner that can be seen in Anatolian villages today.<sup>2</sup> The sultan's palace was at the level of the Pontic tombs, supported by a massive retaining wall.

Other than a few modern houses, the houses to be seen today are primarily from the nineteenth century, with some from the eighteenth and even seventeenth centuries. They incorporate fragments of earlier construction and follow earlier street paths. Although many houses are dilapidated, the neighbourhood is exceptional in conveying the scale, character and amenity of an Ottoman town. Indeed, this neighbourhood was considered the best in Amasya and was, therefore, occupied by Muslim landowners. Although the builders were primarily Armenian Christians, and although other groups were part of

Ottoman society, it was the landed aristocracy which held privileged positions in the empire. Thus, wealthy landowners lived with the best river view and, just behind them on the slope, middle-class landowners established themselves. The palace was higher up with servants' quarters built precariously on the very steep land below the Pontic tombs. Only fragments of the palace remain and the sites of servants quarters are now occupied by squatter settlements.

The Ottoman houses are in many respects typical of many houses in northern Anatolia where abundant forests fostered a rich tradition of woodworking and the development of structural framing, cabinet work and surface panelling. They are constructed of timber frame, with infill of earth or brick covered in plaster. Windows are numerous, and roofs are sloped and covered with tiles. Lower floors are generally constructed of masonry so that the plan can easily follow the irregular contour of streets. Timber above is used to create the regular rectangular rooms preferred by Ottoman builders; consequently the houses have cantilevered projections over the streets. The response to the temperate climate has been to create rooms which can be opened to breezes in the summer and closed for warmth in the relatively mild winter; fireplaces are usual features of living rooms. Abundant rainfall sustains a garden for every house.

Topography and social responsibility conditioned urban form. The terrain in northern Anatolia is extremely irregular and it is typical that houses follow and adjust to contour. There were few rules governing the siting of houses, but it was imperative not to block the view of a neighbour nor to overlook the privacy of a garden. In general, houses were free-standing, connected to other houses only by garden walls; streets were defined by house and garden walls (5).

However, at Amasya the extremely limited amount of space for building on the river front gave rise to attached houses with a particular plan organization framed by parallel walls (6 and 7). To the south are the more private living quarters, with views of the river; these are separated from rooms on the street behind by a garden. The rooms closest to the street are shops and guest quarters for visitors. To the north of the main neighbourhood street is another row of attached houses. The layering of the house plan in relation to the river, to the street, to the south sun and to degrees of privacy within the house reinforces the layering of the overall urban plan. The tightly packed assemblage of houses and gardens gives urbanity to the neighbourhood while maintaining the substantial amount of

planting that is characteristic of several Ottoman towns.

### **The South Bank of the Yeşil Irmak**

Unlike the predominantly residential north bank, the south bank of the river has a history of orchards, gardens and public buildings. The earliest construction in Amasya had to be defensible and was, therefore, clustered on the north bank. At the same time, orchards were planted on the south bank where there was an expanse of relatively level ground. A road was built along the river edge connecting Amasya to other major settlements. Thus, from at least as early as the Pontic period the land use pattern for the river banks was established, complementing the dense construction of the north bank with the open space of the south bank.

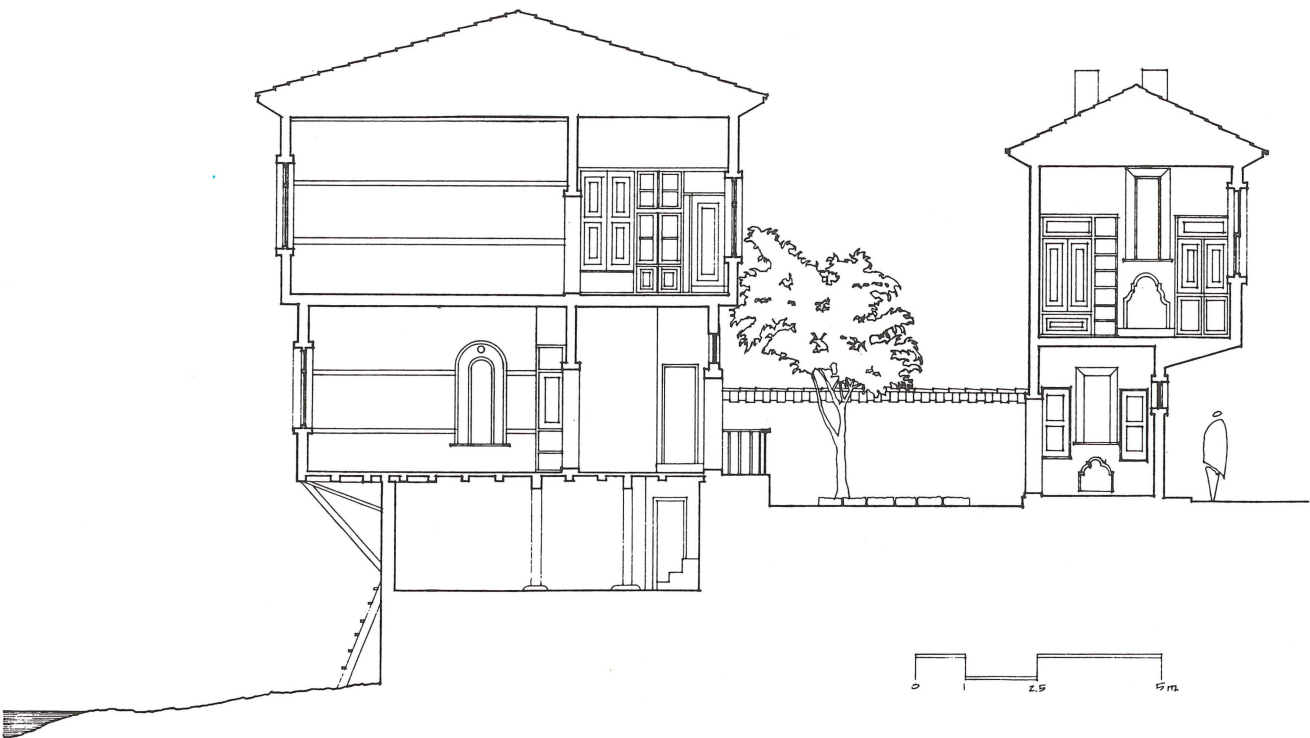
Although there are fragments of Roman and Byzantine construction on the south bank, the first major building activity took place under the Seljuks, who built mosques, schools, markets and other public buildings. The road along the river and the orchards were maintained, and new buildings were sited in the next layer of land to the south. The Seljuk period also saw increased residential development behind the new public buildings. The orchards were, therefore, no longer part of a larger agricultural terrain, but became isolated and used as public gardens. The use of the open space for food production became less important than its use as a promenade. The increasing density of Amasya was focused on the river front as the functional and symbolic centre of the city.

The dramatic growth of Amasya under the Ottomans followed the same patterns of urbanism. Although the Ottomans built in the strip of garden space, they only allowed buildings compatible with public access to gardens. In the mosque complex of Sultan Beyazid II (1485) courts and gardens open towards the river and are available to all, complementing the urban promenade with its important cultural presence. With the Governor's palace and residences of leading citizens on the north side of the river and public buildings and gardens on the south, Amasya had a linear urban centre around which increasing numbers of new neighbourhoods were built. The new neighbourhoods were built to the south and especially to the east where the valley of the Yeşil Irmak broadens.

### **Recent History**

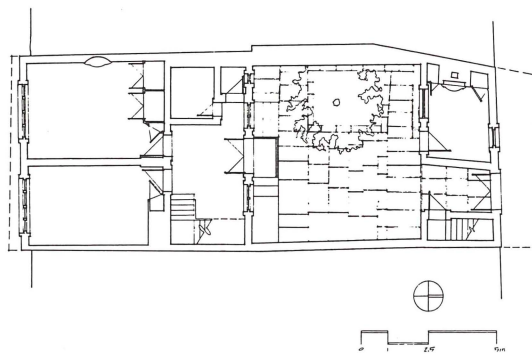
The visitor to Amasya today cannot fail to be struck by the beauty of the river and the elegant equilibrium of building and gardens that contributes to the quality of life of the city. Equally striking and obvious is the assault on these qualities.





Above: Section of a typical Amasya house.  
(Drawing by Victor Burbank.)

Right: Ground floor plan of a typical Amasya house.  
(Drawing by Victor Burbank.)



3. Amasya's unique riverfront features  
Ottoman houses built on the ruins of earlier  
fortified walls.





## HERITAGE



4

The north bank of the river retains much of its character, due to its relatively difficult terrain and, therefore, restricted automobile access. A railroad track hugs the mountain and has relatively little visual impact. Squatter housing occupies sites previously occupied by palace servants and does not disrupt the character of the neighbourhood. Newer government buildings and a hotel are further to the east, minimally disrupting the quality of the centre. The Pontic tombs are a major tourist attraction, and the retaining walls of the palace have been restored to provide easy access by foot. Furthermore, in 1978 the Turkish Ministry of Culture declared the neighbourhood a National Cultural Area and the houses were designated historic buildings. One house has been restored as a museum.

On the negative side, the owners of the houses have little incentive to restore them, preferring for economic reasons to build modern houses. Although the owners are still largely from the old families, they are no longer wealthy because of inheritance customs which continually divide property among heirs. The owners are also largely absentee. To avoid preservation requirements, owners will often selectively vandalize their own property and allow the weather to finish the job of demolition. Efforts at restoration or adaptive re-use are, therefore, rare and are not actively supported by government programmes or by proven economic success in markets other than tourism.

A proposal to remove the squatter housing and build apartments must also be watched carefully. The squatter

housing has the virtue of being relatively well built in a character and scale compatible with its surroundings. Contemporary construction is not always so sensitive. On the south side of the river, the city functions much as it always has, while accommodating a building density considerably greater than in the past.

The road is in most places a boulevard with trees. On weekends the road is closed to traffic and becomes a popular promenade. Small linear cafés, often roofed only by trees and vines, hang out over the river and provide charming spots for relaxation and refreshment as well as positive reinforcement of the character of the river edge (8). The mosque complex of Beyazid II continues to offer its tranquil spaces to passerby and worshipper alike. Future planning calls for the development of the boulevard as an up-market shopping and residential area.

On the other hand, the site of the Beyazid mosque is the only remnant of the larger garden strip that survived through most of the Ottoman period. The rest has been filled with largely undistinguished buildings that make little gesture to the river or to the idea of a garden promenade. The worst buildings are facelessly bureaucratic, while the best make serious attempts to relate to the pattern, scale and character of Amasya in contemporary ways. A new civic square to the east is intended to be the new centre of town, but cannot compete in amenity with the older river promenade (9).

Like many traditional environments, the centre of Amasya is fragile in the face of contemporary development. Images of

*4. Planting in private gardens hangs out over the street, softening the already humane scale of the neighbourhood.*

modernity too often do not respect or reflect local climate, topography and culture. Ottoman urbanism, in particular, was never based on the kind of strong formalism characteristic of western cultures. The sultans provided important centres of cultural, religious and commercial activity, allowing residential development to fill in between these complexes. Monuments are not joined by boulevards or united by public squares as, for example, in Paris or Rome. Rather, there is an organic equilibrium characterized especially by pedestrian oriented gardens and streets organized more with respect to topography and social relationships than to political spectacle. Indeed, an Ottoman town has a sense of existing intimately with the landscape, an extension, perhaps, of nomadic sensibilities that are considered to be among the generators of Turkish house form.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the modernism embraced by Turkey at the end of the Ottoman period should conflict with older traditions.

However, Amasya provides an example of Ottoman urbanism which is paradigmatic in its clarity of urban structure and in its persuasiveness of urban amenity. As such, it provides a model for urban development that might shape the future. Far from being a static artefact of history, Amasya demonstrates principles and attitudes about an urbanism that is as unique to its place as it is instructive to the world at large.





5. View of the new civic square, looking south-east; the new apartment building to the east of the Ottoman mosque in the centre of the picture demonstrates interest in the scale and character of Amasya.

6. Numerous cafés line the south bank of the river.

#### Notes

1. Eldem, Sedat Hakki, *Turkish Houses, Ottoman Period*, Volume III, T.A.C., Istanbul, 1987, pp. 269.
2. Goodwin, Godfrey, *A History of Ottoman Architecture*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 1987, pp. 429-430.
3. Küçükerman, Önder, *Turkish House: In Search of Spatial Identity*, Turkish Touring and Automobile Association, Istanbul, 1985, pp. 27-30, 87.

William Bechhoefer, AIA, is Associate Professor and Director of International Studies in Architecture at the University of Maryland School of Architecture, where he teaches design studio and theory courses focusing on issues of regionalism, particularly in the developing world. He has also taught and directed research in Afghanistan, Tunisia, Turkey and Sri Lanka.

Ali Kamil Yalçın practises architecture in Amasya. His work stresses restoration and renovation of older buildings as well as new buildings that are compatible with older cities. He has recently been active in surveying and documenting the historic houses of Amasya. 